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“Uses” and “ab-uses” of history. Possible consequences for history teaching at schools*

1 Introduction

Use and Abuse of History. The terms central in the subject of this conference are both: quite strong and quite unclear – especially when applied to a subject like history. When confronted with the suggestion to contribute to the discussions, here, I immediately had some associations coming to my mind which had nothing to do with history at all, but with a series of “abuse”-subjects in public debate of recent years – mostly abuse of children by adults in educational or religious institutions, by parents, and so on. Surely, this was not what was meant by the colleagues suggesting this venue. So I put these associations at bay – but they will play a role in my talk later on.

Of course, I was also reminded of professional debates not only more close to, but rather directly central in the area I am working on: theory of history, namely the question of the possibility of truth and objectivity in our domain. This is something many colleagues have reflected upon and where some fundamental insights have been gained in the last decades. So the question for me was in this case, whether under the heading of “use and abuse” there was to be another discussion of objectivity. I doubted that this would meet much interest, here. So I tried to put this strand aside, too.

There is, of course another strand of debate, related to the latter, which is much more prone to the subject of this event, and that is the question of responsibility of professional historians and all others presenting accounts of the past – more concrete, the question of what history to tell and what not to tell. It is the question about the correct, not the true, history, even though the two questions are strongly interrelated, at least from some points of view.

Much more rewarding, so I thought, would be the subjects covered by others, about *how* to ad-

* This article represents a Talk delivered at the EUSTORY Seminar “(Ab-)Uses of History”, Helsinki; August, 7th – 10th, 2011.

dress controversial and “problematic” issues in research and teaching. From my point of view, I might already state here at the beginning, there is not the question on whether to present a specific historical account, it is not about properly selecting, but rather about the attitudes, the function and the methods. In my view, it is not the “what” but the “how” and “what for” of historiography and history teaching, which merit reflection. So “use” and “abuse” are not about whether presenting a specific subject, a specific story, amounts to abuse, but whether there are specific criteria by which to judge about the “how” of this presentation.

Two more points of start for my reflection need to be mentioned. First of all, the terms “use and abuse” are far from well elaborated. They are used quite differently, especially in our domain. This needs to be reflected, first. And here a reference needs to be made to the recent discussions about child abuse.

Secondly, the question of “uses” of history (in the more proper sense) has already been addressed by colleagues. Margret Macmillan, the renowned Canadian colleague, has published a popular reflection on it quite recently, and one of the colleagues present here, Klas Göran Karlsson, has taken up the question of uses and even of abuse at a conference in November 2008, the proceedings of which have just been published. It is his very short answer of the question what defines abuse, which I'd like to initially cite, criticising one of his ideas, but to finally come to a conclusion, which can be read as a support of his.

2 The problem of “use and abuse” I: Terminology

Within his considerations, Karlsson, however causally quotes Friedrich Nietzsche's second “untimely considerations”. This famous text, which starts with an appraisal of the animals' ignorance of any history, their living only in a present, thus being free from any obligations of any past, and of a “superhistorical” standpoint (which in my view, informed by Jörn Rüsen, would rather be an exemplaric use of history), and then differentiates between three “uses” of history (monumental, antiquarian, critical), all of which are deeply rooted in present needs, has at least in some English editions (although not the better one used by Karlsson) been titled “Use and Abuse”. This notion is problematic. Nietzsche most profoundly did not want to constitute a specific

criterion for proper use of history lying in its own domain, but reflected upon the advantages and disadvantages of history (thus the best translation, similar to that of the edition used by Karlsson: “uses and disadvantages”).¹ As for the subject of my talk and of the whole conference, I take it that we don't talk about “advantages” and “disadvantages”, about the “pros” and “cons” of referring to the past, that its is not a question of whether to “use” history in the first place, but that we do talk about the dimension of *proper* and *improper* use.

3 Uses and Abuses – A Question of Typology?

In his presentation in 2008, Klas-Göran Karlsson distinguished different “uses” of history, as had Margret Macmillan: In short, their reflections, which are both very interesting and valuable to read, can be summarized as a typology of motivations of presenting accounts of the past for reasons which lie in the present. There are quite a variety of such motivations and of specific structures of presentations following them. The enumeration here can give just an overview.

1. scientific usage: characterized by internal criteria of quality and validity, by the idea of approximating an ideal knowledge or at least the idea of progressively “better” understanding, by the regulative idea of a dissociation between the authors' interests and the subject matter researched, and by the idea that teaching and telling (Karlsson speaks of “mediation”, which is by far a too reflective term for the position sketched here) means “transport” of the proper knowledge into the learners' or readers'/listeners' minds (which is thought possible because the “true” history – even though “valid” and “relevant” – is conceived as independent from the recipients' perspectives and interests as from the researchers'.
2. Existential use of history
3. moral use of history
4. ideological use of history

1 Karlsson (2011), p. 132 citing Nietzsche, Friedrich (1983): „On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.“ In: Nietzsche, Friedrich: *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge, UP, pp. 57-124.

5. “non-use”
6. “politico-pedagogical use”
7. MACMILLANS “History for Comfort”
 1. History as the ultimate explanation for life
 2. History as an escape from the present
 3. History as a book of examples for good and evil
 4. History as the judge for current politics
 5. History as a field of current politics (reconciliation, repentance, apologies, history wars)

All of these uses – as is made explicitly clear by Karlsson, have their merits, their own dignity. They cannot be just divided into supportable and insupportable, in uses and abuses. This in part is due, I'd like to suggest, that Karlsson's and Macmillan's typologies are not “pure” typologies, listing mutually exclusive modes or ways of “using” history, but rather relevant and combinable dimensions which need to be discerned within any “use” of history. It may be true that there is no necessity for them all to be present in a randomly selected use, but at least some of them will always be there in combination: politico-pedagogical use can be highly driven by moral considerations, or by ideological ones, and so on.

For us, glad to say, this is no problem, *because* Karlsson does not single out some as proper and others as improper. The criterion for abuse, according to him, is – in a pictorial metaphor – not a division *between* some of them and others, but lying *across* them, dividing feasible and fallible versions in each category: for him, it is the violation of human rights.

But: is this a criterion which is in any way helpful as to the specificities of history? Can it be satisfying to refer to a criterion outside the theory of history, only? Isn't there something like an inside criterion as to when a presentation of history, a story etc. amounts to abuse?

In general, I'd like to support Karlsson's liberal view that there is not one “correct” use of history, not one way of “doing it”, which takes all the merits, but that the diversity of “usages” can be

feasible and supportable – especially that it is not just the “scientific” use or the history of the historians, which has more dignity. Margret Macmillan also rejects the idea that history belongs to the historians, even though she more strongly keeps up the idea that historians have a stronger capacity to formulate valid histories, mostly because of their possibility to take more time and efforts on the task (because they are trained and paid to do so), but also with a reference to the idea that historians can be more impartial, more distanced than normal people. Throughout her book, the idea is visible that there is one criterion for use and abuse which comes from history itself, namely the appropriateness of the depiction of the past: The past itself is the criterion for use and abuse of history.

To a much lesser degree, this criterion is also discernible in Karlsson's other differentiation between a genetic and a genealogical mode of history. “Genetic” he calls – not as the first – the “perspective” in which we gain and transmit knowledge about the development up to now, whereas the term “genealogical” refers to the “making” of history “by reflecting ourselves and our present situation in the past” (Karlsson 2011, 133). His (supportable) ideal is the “balance” of these two modes in what he calls a “reflective historical consciousness”,² which could “join these two fundamental historical perspectives in so far that a genealogical perspective can provide genetic history with agency and criteria of relevance, while a genetic perspective is needed not only to supply us with historical contents, but also to help us understand why history is recalled and represented the way it is.” (Karlsson 2011, 134). He links this to Kierkegaard's dictum about living life forward, but understanding it backward. Again: Supportable as this view is, it is also problematic, insofar as it sums up to differentiating between a knowledge of the “real history” of the “contents” (what ever that means: what is the container of these contents?) and its *uses* in the present, between the substratum and the operations. This, to my view, can not hold. I will dwell on this point from another angle in a few minutes, but would like to sketch my solution here in advance, first: I don't think that there is a possibility of any division between the substratum of historical “contents”, of any “real” history and the operation of historical thinking. In my theoretical framework, they are linked together much more profoundly than sug-

2 Reference to the FUEP project and the discussion about whether historical consciousness were not reflective by default or by definition (Pandel, Schönemann) in Germany? Support for Karlsson's position.

gested by Karlsson. It is not a question of *joining* these two perspectives or modes, but whether they can be separated from one another in the first place more than analytically. I suggest that what Karlsson calls “genealogical” is a *modus*, a *mode* of asking, of the operation which essentially turns our advertence to things past and their interconnections, in the first place, while what he calls “genetic” is a mode of answering to such questions stemming from the genealogical perspective. “Genetic” then can be the type of history told when asked for one’s genealogy. However, it is not the only mode for such narrative answers. Jörn Rüsen already distinguished at least four of them in his well-known typology later on corrected and refined by Bodo von Borries (and me).³ Genealogical questions, questions asked with a view to the past out of a present need for agency and relevance, can not only be answered by telling a genetic story highlighting and stressing a development of fundamental changes, but also by referring to rules and laws covering situations occurring in quite different times (the exemplaric mode) or by referring to well-established traditions (the traditional mode).

Thus – and this is why I refer to this point here – the differentiation between the history and its “use” is erroneous: History, or rather: histories, do only come into existence by “usage”. They are *not* a substratum already present when the genealogical interest starts acting – at least not in the way suggested by the title of this conference and by Karlsson and more strongly by Macmillan.

4 The Problem of “Use and Abuse” II: Conceptualization

I already hinted that I think that the idea of “using” history is wrong in a certain way. In order to illustrate this, I’d like to refer to the already mentioned debate on child abuse: When the media started to be full of this concept of “child abuse”, some of the brighter commentators immediately asked (without wanting to play down), whether talk of child-abuse was not a problem in itself, because it forces us to think about what a proper “use” of children would be. Can children be “used” so that one can differentiate other uses as improper, which then are called “abuse”?

3 On this, see Körber, Andreas (2011): “German History Didactics: From Historical Consciousness to Historical Competencies – and beyond?” In: Historisch denken lernen. <http://koerber2005.erzwiss.uni-hamburg.de/wordpress-mu/historischdenkenlernen/2011/12/11/1348/>, p. 13f.

The idea behind this challenge of the public debate and its terminology is conceptual: Whoever uses the *term* “child abuse” refers to a concept of “child use” and in it to a concept of children as being “objects”. Human rights, however, demand – at least when based on the ideas of Kant – that no human being be treated only as a means to some outside aim, that no human being be treated as an object only.

Let's dwell for a moment on the notion of “usage” and on the connotation of the object implied in it.

Clearly, in this understanding of “usage”, of “emploi”, the object is already there before it is used – we have already seen that point. But more – it also is considered of existing *as it is* independently of the usage. The object to be used is seen to have an existence and a specific constitution independent from the usage and the user. If to people e.g. use a book for gathering information, the book itself, the material text, is given and the same for both of them. If they use it for e.g. blocking a door against moving in the wind, the book also is taken as an existing object.

“Using” means to employ an “objectively” existing object for some outside purpose.

For this kind of notion, there can be some criteria for feasibility considered:

Criteria for feasible uses of this kind may be manifold:

1. The first criterion may be whether the object was intended for the purpose. Thus to take a book for reading may be more feasible than for using it for blocking a door against wind etc. But as we can see, this not a necessary criterion: it may be feasible to “ab-use” an object for a new, unintended purpose, if other criteria apply:
 1. First, that the objects really helps to fulfil the function. The object must be useful. In constructivist terms, what is central here, is the viability.
 2. Second, whether the object is damaged in such using. If a book is most likely to be squeezed to unreadable status by the wind-moved door, its deploy for this purpose may be rendered “ab-use” in the normative sense.

3. Thirdly, another criterion can refer to the symbolic value of the object. Using a book for stopping a door against wind may be feasible for someone, even though he would call the use of a Qu'ran abuse.

All these criteria have two things in common:

1. They refer to cases in which objects were used for purposes for which they were not intended.
2. They are applicable – as said before – if history is to be conceived as a pre-existing entity, unchanged for all of its users.

So we should once more think about what history is and what it is made for.

1. If “history” refers to an entity independent from our usage, to the real past or at least our best knowledge of it, we should, I think, easily confer that it was NOT made for any of our uses. It is one of the thoughts stressed in some early concepts of post-modern theory of history: Our predecessors, the people having lived before our times, did not do so *in order to provide us with “content”*, with examples. They may not be reduced to being the substratum of our own orientation. The question, then, is not that of what kind of use would amount to ab-use, but whether history should be used at all. If we take this argument seriously (and I think we should), it would forbid *any “use”* of history for some other purpose than to “live it”. “History” taken as the past entity of reality and the lives in it, clearly have no other purpose than to exist.
2. If “history” does not refer to this past reality, but to our own concepts of them, to our constructions, then we cannot object to such “usage”, because history is not used as a distinct object were, but is created in this operation in the first place.

So I clearly tend to the second understanding of history – and I would preserve the term for it. The former, the real lives of the people in the past, for their hopes and values etc., should be called “the past” only.

So again, we arrive at a distinction which is very central: The reality of other times is “the past”. It can be used, and maybe also “abused” in the meaning of the term used in recent discussions:

improper, condemnable emploi of an existing object.

But clearly, this does not mean that “anything goes”, that everybody is unconditionally free to create any historical account she or he wishes, that there are no criteria whatsoever.

So let's try to take the argumentation a bit further:

History in the understanding just outlined is a relational concept. It is not the past in itself, but a certain relation between the past(s) and a specific present – more precisely: a specific social, cultural, normative and temporal position. Therefore, criteria for the feasibility of histories can only be taken from the relation. Jörn Rüsen has suggested three of them:

1. empirical plausibility⁴
2. normative plausibility
3. narrative plausibility.

Since we do not have any other access to the past reality as the substratum of historiography, we cannot compare any given history to this reality, but only either to other histories of the same narrative (and that is: selective, partitional, perspectival, normative etc.) nature. If we want to test the empirical plausibility of a history, then we should test it against the current accessible amount of best first-hand data. As for the normative ingredients, we need to compare it to our own audience and society's values and as for the narrative plausibility we have to refer to the current ideas of what is acceptable in terms of explaining etc.

But this may not be enough for our purpose. I only referring to Rüsens tripartite concept of plausibilities, we have reduced the question of ab-use of history to the question of “objectivity”. I don't think this is satisfactory.

So I think we should take into account another characteristic of “history” in the narrativist meaning: “History” – even though an individually created narrative relation to the past – is a communicative concept. History unfolds its full capability of orientation if it does not only link us as indi-

4 The German term “Triftigkeit” normally can be translated to “cogency”, which however connotes too strongly the aspect of “forcing”, of leaving no alternative, which is not implied here.

viduals, quasi as monads, to a past that is foregone, but if it helps us understand how our present society in its complexity has been come about and how it is perceived by others. If we want to be able to act in our society, we do not only have to clarify our own relation to the past, but we have to do so with that of our co-members of society also. It is not only about who / think / am in *my* light of the past, and what / make of it, about my intentions and motivations, but also about

- who the (different!) others think they are, in their view of the past, what their perceptions of themselves are and their possible actions,
- who / think *they* are and what they could or should do,
- who they think I or we are, etc.

For this collective orientation, we need to exchange our narratives, we need to tell them, but we also need to integrate them.

Form this consideration, long ago laid out by Kurt Röttgers, we can abstract some other criteria for use and abuse of history. But before I shortly elaborate on them, I might stress, that from here on, these criteria do not refer to “history” as a synonym of “the past”, but that here I refer to the narrative relations to the past, which I would reserve the term history for.

1. First of all, if one function of histories is not only to individually, but to collectively orientate, then they need to integrate perspectives. In order to do so, they need to reflect the valid perspectives, i.e. the interests, needs, values etc. of today's members of society. A history which does not *reflect* their different perspectives, questions, values, patterns of explanation etc. would not be orientating but dis-orientating. So as a criterion, proper history have to *integrate* the perspectives of different partitions of their audience, not to *impose* one perspective on these different fractions.
2. Secondly, histories have to *offer* narrative explanations, connections, and attitudes to the past as well as conclusions and motivations. Again it would be improper (and here I would start to use the word ab-use in the full sense) if they *imposed* such connections

and motivations. This criterion needs some more elaboration: How can a history *offer* but not *impose* if it is supposed to *present* such a connection. How can a history fulfil its narrative task but not overdue it in this direction? The answer I suggest here is: By allowing the reader, the listener to take his own position in relation not only to the past but to the narrative structure of the history itself – by laying open the ingredients, the inner structures, so that the reader can relate to them.

If this is what Karlsson meant by not violating human rights, if his criterion was that the audience, the addressees, the public needs to be taken seriously in their capacity to actively relate to story, and that not doing so would be violating human rights – then I fully agree.

5 Using Histories

So slowly taking the curve to the last aspect, I hold that there is a “using” history in the sense of “using narrative structures” in human communication. And in this sense, there can be use and abuse – and they can be seen on at least two sides of the communication:

1. “Using history” can mean the operations a person carries out with regard to a given, a presented narrative, be it their “(cognitive) particulars” (Karlsson 2011, 135), the connections constructed in it, the conclusions drawn and offered and the appeals made. It can consist in their accepting them and in their doubting, their distancing from them, their critique.

On the recipient's side, then, proper use of histories would be to recognize and accept one's own capacity and responsibility, one's entitlement, but also obligation to actively relate to histories. It means to listen and read thinking.

2. On the author's side, proper use of history means a way of addressing the recipient in a way which again recognizes his competence, it means to not trap him into a situation where he cannot actively relate, he may not be overpowered or overwhelmed.⁵ This re-

⁵ This aspect is of course not only relevant for history. In teaching contexts, it has been formulated with reference to social studies as the first aspect of the „Beutelsbacher Konsens“ – the „Überwältigungsverbot“.

quires to

1. identify rather than hide the constructional status of the present history, the fact that it has been created by a specific, personal authors, with specific questions in mind, a specific background etc.
2. to make visible his perspectives and values etc.,
3. to discuss the ingredients of the story, the characteristics of the primary source material used, the concepts applied etc.
4. to at least acknowledge, better: indicate, best: present and discuss contrasting and contradictory materials, conclusion, judgements,
5. to at least indicate those parts of the story, which are more inferential than others – in a pictorial metaphor: which might be drawn in black and white or greyscale rather than full colour.

Misuse, or abuse then clearly would be to hinder the recipient to make up his own mind, to reflect his/her own situation towards the story told, the “contents”, the values and concepts applied etc. Again: to violate the human right to self-determination.

Two small remarks by the way:

1. Using these criteria, we might easily arrive at condemning much of Eastern German historiography and history teaching – but I am sure that lots of historiography and teaching in the “free west” would look meek, too).
2. The concept of “mediation” used by Karlsson and criticised by me above, can be regarded from here, too: If “mediation” is considered as “transmission” of a story to an audience, their heads and minds only, in a way where it has to be unchanged, this would be abuse. The term “Vermittlung” in German clearly has the same problem. In most cases it is taken as “transfer of knowledge” to the students, whereas a proper consideration not only from pedagogical perspective but also from terminology would yield that it

has to make different perspectives and understandings, different positions towards an object, a “content”, here: a historical account meet and recognize each other.

6 Use and abuse in History Teaching

This leads over to the last aspect: For didactics, use and abuse of history can also be discussed on the basis laid down above.

Any history teaching which only focuses on providing students with (at least parts of) the *one* story in a fashion where it is best unchanged, any teaching which conceals from learners the *nature* both of the specific history at hand (including those in the textbooks) and of history as such as a narrative construct, with strengths in orientating offer but also with limits, which conceals that these histories do not just represent the past, but have a function in today's societies and that they need to be assessed, related to, analysed and scrutinised, *amounts to ab-use*.

History teaching not abusing history (or better: histories) then has to focus on the learners acquisition of the capacities, the competencies to recognize and accept their own responsibility and entitlement towards presented stories. Learners must not only learn to tell stories (in a proper way) but also to actively act as critical recipients. This is not only valid with a view to the individual's human right of self-determination, but also with a focus on society and on history as such: Abuse can only work if recipients do not recognize and actively take their critical role.

History teaching which is about hindering ab-use, then, is about

1. empowerment – about empowerment of the learners to acknowledge and assert their own entitlement
2. It is about not just teaching “the history”, but also the narrative, constructive logic of history *from the start*,
3. It is about actively addressing historical debates and history wars – but not creating the impression that these history debates and wars as such were abuse, but that maybe one side, more often some participants on all sides, have better and worse arguments, which may be abuse,

4. it is about considering the role of history and of specific argumentations in such debates and history wars,
5. it is *not* about avoiding to take sides and stands, but to make clear on what grounds they are taken – and about letting the learners to take their own stands (but of course not without proper argumentation).

It would be abuse to hinder learners to get insight into the function and role of history and histories in societal debates and to take their own reflected position.